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SONGS OF JEWISH REBIRTH



LOUIS I. NEWMAN



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SONGS OF JEWISH REBIRTH

by
LOUIS I. NEWMAN

NEW YORK
BLOCH PUBLISHING COMPANY
1921

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LOUIS I. NEWMAN

NOTE

I publish these poems in response to the request of several friends, and for circulation among them. They represent the thought of a few precious leisure moments over a period of two years. The poems have appeared at various times in the Jewish daily and periodical press including the *American Hebrew*, the *Jewish Daily News*, the *Jewish Forum*, the *Jewish Exponent*, the *Young Judean* and the *American Israelite*. I am further prompted to collate these verses by reason of the recent dearth of poems relating to the life of the American Jew.

L. I. N.

New York, September, 1921

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SONGS OF JEWISH REBIRTH

SONGS OF JEWISH REBIRTH
ON SEEING SARGENT'S "SYNAGOGUE" AND
"CHURCH"

What mean you, master of the brush and tube?
Where has your genius fled? You from whose brain
The rapt seraphic seers of Israel
Leaped on the canvas, full-grown into life.
Why paint you now a maid upon her throne,
Inscribed—oh, mockery—with prophets' names,
Who holds the goblet and the wafer poised
On robes that lightly touch the thorn-crowned Christ?
Why are her eyes so luminous and clear
Like Catherine aflame with mystic sight?

And why upon another sheet you paint
A fearsome thing? What mystery broods here?
What riddle in this beardless figure lurks?
Is this a royal sire with hoary locks
That fall distraught across a feeble breast?
Or is this Israel's daughter, Bath-Zion,
Of whom sage Jeremiah sang his plaint:
"She that was great among the nations once
Is now become a beldame, aged, lone."

Why should the gilded crown be tottering?
Why should her sinewed fingers madly clutch
The shattered halves of Shiloh's sceptre-staff;
And why the tablets of the law or yet
A golden breastplate should she hug and clasp
To hide her nakedness?

Why should she, fallen on the bloody stone,
Like Hecuba or Priam slain at Troy,
Drag tight, idolatrous, emblazoned folds,
Whereon the cherubs, like Medusa-heads,
With vacant or malignant stares, behold her grief?
And why, we ask you, why those sightless eyes,
As if in contrast to the brilliant orbs
Of your bright virgin clothed in churchly guise?
Would you proclaim that in the flame and heat
Of Jahweh's wrath her sockets have burned void?
And why bind round her head the sable band,
As if to say, though sight were vouchsafed her,
Yet self-imposed, black ignorance lay there?

Oh, master-painter, is your symbol true
Of that great hearth where gentle Hillel taught
Your Christ his mild and soothing words of truth?
Where Jochanan, Maimonides, Rashi
And Rabbi Ezra, mentioned by your poet,
The God-intoxicated Benedict,
The hunchback Socrates in latter days,
Revealed their mighty thoughts that shook mankind.

Think you our youth will mutely close their lips
When you weave painted errors in your text?
We are an ancient folk, sore-weighted with years;
Yet are we ever young; undying fire
Runs through our veins. Our bearded patriarchs
Still dream the dreams of God. Our warrior youth
See visions and the Law from us still flows.

What mean you, master of the brush and tube;
Where has your genius fled?

SIMPSON STREET, THE BRONX

My people have pushed their restless course,
In quest of things better and finer,
Past the tents of the desert,
The mire and panic of the Pale,
The teeming tenements and dens;
They have reached the broad streets of the Bronx,
And claim its expanse as a homeland.

The highways are close-packed as of old:
Pushcarts, fruit wagons, automobiles,
Baby carriages, numberless as the sea-sands.
Modern apartments display from their windows
Bedding and clotheslines and national flags;

Halls and rooms squirm with their hordes,
Neighbors unknown to each other.
Nestling against iron gratings,
'Neath which the Gentile janitors sojourn,
Cans of rotting garbage, or cinders and ash
Empty their dust at morn or midday
And whiten the pavement and its populace.

As of old are the dwellers of these streets:
Children play at chalk-marks,
With grimy fingers push their checkers,
Or smack the flying handball.
Baby boys and girls toddle between the feet
Of the smiling or ill-humored stranger.
Here sit the painted Jezebels,
Preening their wings in the sun;
Matrons abloom, nursing their young at the breast,

Chattering their gossip
Of grocers and movies and landlords,
Clad in their furs and their gems,
Half-Oriental, half-Occidental,
A race in transition.

At night the pairs promenade as of old,
Under Egypt's or Babylon's or Spain's skies,
Or late on the now-scorned East Side.
'Mid the roar of the heedless trains,
They make their vows in the hallways,
On the steps, by the glare of the shoplights.
Young Jews dressed to fashion's book:
Bright cravats, new-sewn spats;
Peacocks and paradise birds,
Cockatrells and parrots.

This, alas, is my people, once again on the march.
Would they exchange their jarring syncopated tunes
For the songs of Zion or the pew?
Would they renounce their well-fed ease,
To dig as hungry pioneers, with naked fingers?
Where are our seers, our warrior youth
Among these ignoble offspring,
These powdered and kalsomined daughters,
Of stern and faith-bound sires?

And yet something hot and strong vibrates
In the mass of these curious beings:
Their chewing jaws move in perpetual rhythm;
They hunger for the fleshpots (and the paint-pots);
Yet a more than mortal spark troubles their breasts,
They struggle and are discontent,
Their complacency is stung by a thousand darts
Of pride, hope and aspiration.

The hours pass, the years pass:
The uncouth, the loutish, the boors,
Become earth's gentle noblemen,
Chivalrous and gallant and high-bred.
From chaos emerge learning and light;
My brothers move eagerly towards the heroic and true;
Here in exile they learn the secret of the larger life;
They learn the tale of the Community,
They learn the tale of the Nation.
The dross is transmuted soon into priceless metal.

Forth from here went the sons of the Seventy-Seventh;
Forth from here poets and mystics,
Forth from here men and women consumed with a passion
For martyrdom in the name of justice and beauty.

Scratch your vulgarians;
Behold your prophets!

THE CHOSEN

I saw a shaft of sunlight pierce a mist,
And cleave a dusky valley near and far;
It carved its path, a flaming scimitar,
As if it sought a hallowed place of tryst.
Then on a bearded peak I saw it list,
And build a halo round the shaggy crest;
A rainbow marked the haven of its quest,
Arched low like Nippon's bridges, moisture-kissed.

So have I seen across the murky page,
The sign of God's old covenant foretell
His favorite kin, elect of every age.
Upon our shoulders, prophet-mantles fell,
A light ineffable enwraps the stage
Whereon we tread, God's chosen, Israel.

THE FACE OF HERZL.

(Suggested by a rare etching by Herman Struck.)

The face of Herzl hangs upon my wall;
Black-bearded like some sable Syrian king.
The pen of grief has etched her sombre pall
O'er those pale cheeks. So looked he when he died,
Ere yet his brooding soul had taken wing.
Those eyes that darted lightning 'neath his brow
Are faded in their dark-ringed sockets now,
Like embers, lustreless, their flame denied.

A man of sorrows! Chained within those eyes
A crowded tale of hope and struggle lies;
The wails of Kishineff assail his rest;
The Judenschmerz, the world-pain, sear his breast.
Like Moses on the mount-of-vision's height,
Menasseh, champion of his people's right,
He knows that triumph dawns for him too late;
His heart in silence breaks beyond the gate.

My eyes behold his face last ere I sleep;
I wake at morn to greet his gaze and weep;
It haunts me where I go. Would he might call:
"On you an edge of our torn mantle fall!"
Then would I leap, full-armed, to heed his plea:
"Hineini! Here am I! Send me! Send me!"

“—IN HEBREW”

They say, little son of mine,
That in far-off Palestine:

The tots in the gardens play
In Hebrew!

The birds in the tree-tops sing
In Hebrew!

And even the fuzzy dogs bark
As they romp away for a lark
—In Hebrew!

THE WAILING WALL CRUMBLES

(On the day the British under General Allenby entered Jerusalem, a rumor came to America that the Western or Wailing Wall which had stood since the fall of the Temple, had crumbled to the ground.)

Old Wailing Wall, crumble, your labor is done;
Your hour has sounded; your purpose is won;
Two thousand sad years you have been the retreat
Of pain-tortured spirits, and world-weary feet.

For in the dark moment when impious hand
Defiled the loved Temple, and hurled the red band,
You only remained, for the birds from the peaks
Brought dewdrops of rescue and hope in their beaks.

But had God assembled the flood of our tears,
Poured out for our sorrows in exile, our fears;
Not you alone, plucked from the burning, would stand,
But all Judah safe in his dream-hallowed land.

II

Yet now need we longer raise wails for our dead;
With sighs rend our garment, with sobs dash our head?
No! Cease, oh my people, your anguish and moans,
Lest heedless, we darken the heavens with groans.

The Wailing Wall crumbles! But hark, at the gate,
With no martial music, no lordly estate.
The conqueror enters, with high-lifted head,
On foot, and with humble and reverent tread.

While in the cool daybreak, wild oaths crowd the air,
The baffled usurper seeks madly his lair;
God's justice has fated the cannon's hoarse breath,
To shatter his boastings by terror and death.

III

But are these not strangers who come on the day
When Judah, the Hammerer, gave freedom sway?
Yes, Gentiles in blood, ruled by wide-varied laws,
But brothers and comrades in one common cause.

And see, in their ranks, march our own valiant youth.
A smile in their heart, in their hand swords of truth;
And over them broods as they strike and pursue,
The spirit of Maccabee, kindled anew.

The Lions of Judah and Britain have sworn:
In justice and joy shall the Jew be born;
That liberty live where the East joins the West,
And through Israel, all the nations be blessed.

IV

The Wailing Wall crumbles! But listen, old Wall,
Each grain of your dust as your rocks crack and fall,
Will waft its bold message abroad through the earth,
And lead a new soul to the soil of rebirth.

Not pious, worn greybeards in search of a grave,
But radiant young heroes, the strong and the brave;
Not sucked dry of zeal, and of vision grown cold,
But burning to build and to plant and to hold.

So crumble, old Wall, if your labor must cease;
Return to the dust whence you came, in full peace.
And know as you perish, that new walls will rise.
Live on in your sons, for the Jew never dies!

CHANGELING

A TRIALOGUE

(An Anti-Zionist Jewish scholar once compared the Jewish people to a dove which flies on one wing—internationalism, and rests on the other—nationalism.)

“A Midrash tells,” proclaimed the Sage,
“That Israel in every age
Must make his voyage like a dove
On one wing—universal love,
And rest on one—the love of kin.”

“But Rabbi,” bold disciples ask,
“Needs must the dove refuse its task;
Unless its weary pinion rest,
Its fresh wing hasten to the test,
’Twill flutter to the ground.”

Then spoke the heretic his mood:
“My people is no feeble brood;
To undreamed heights we now aspire,
On giant wings that never tire.
For Israel an eagle is!”

HAIL O' MY YOUNG PIONEERS!

Ye are my young pioneers,
Ye are my vision-led seers,
Ye are the hope of my years,
Ye are the smile in my tears.

Eastward a dream turns your brow,
Eastward your ship bends its prow,
Eastward your multitudes flow,
Eastward your star sheds its glow.

Downward the swoop of your axe,
Downward the curve of your backs,
Downward your plough carves its tracks,
Downward the seed and the flax.

Up with the ore from the mine,
Up with the mud from the brine,
Up with the dam's solid line,
Up with the nation's bold sign.

Build where the midland sea foams,
Build where the frontiersman roams,
Build skyward turrets and domes,
Build stately cities and homes.

Forward ye sluggards who plod,
Forward ye sleepers who nod,
Forward on Israel's sod,
Forward for land and for God.

Hail and farewell to all fears,
Hail to the herald who nears,
Hail to the dawn that appears,
Hail O my young pioneers!

KURT EISNER

(On February 23, 1919, Kurt Eisner, the Jewish Premier of Munich, was assassinated by an Imperial reactionary for his address in Switzerland, denouncing Germany's war lords.)

Add one more name to that immortal roll

Of martyrs for the shackled word of truth:
Kurt Eisner, dauntless freeman, prophet-soul,
Whose memory has won eternal youth.

From dungeon-cell, enchained by freedom's foes,
He roused his people, snapped the tyrant's yoke.
Amid the riot and the storm he rose,
A giant builder, firmer than the oak.

Then on the fatal day when cowards sought
To play the hypocrite; with whines and tears
To wash away the wrongs their lust had wrought,
And ease each quaking culprit of his fears,

He dared, though death he knew must be his end,
To speak the truth that seared like scorching flame,
"On you the guilt; from you the full amend;
On you the penalty; on you the shame!"

For this, a precious sacrifice he died;
Yet his bold word, now hallowed by his blood
Will waken millions, long of light denied,
And purge their hearts as by a mighty flood.

Oh heavy-laden race from which he came,
Whose martyrs at the stake and barricade
Outnumber heaven's stars, your son now claim,
And weep when with his fathers he is laid!

The world may point its finger, shower scorn
On renegades who bring their kin ill-fame;
But let men heed the hero whom they mourn,
And judge his race with justice, in his name.

A CONVENTION FANTASY

By One Who Stayed Away.

I trace a myriad David's shields
Among the starlit skies;
I catch the sound of a nation's hymns
Within the zephyr's sighs.
For I have fled to the hermit's lodge,
Far from the city's streets;
And I have chosen sweet solitude
Where the pulse of nature beats.

I cannot follow my mournful thoughts
As they leap across the land,
To abide where Zion's hosts are met,
A joyful and resolute band.
So I will convene a congress here,
In nature's genial haunts,
And conjure up scenes of playful mood,
To appease my spirit's wants,

The arching skies our convention-hall,
Its roof the painted clouds;
The shaggy hills shall lend their trees,
Tier upon tier for crowds.
As program-master, I call the roll:
The delegates skip and run
From thicket and dell, from nook and glade,
Seeking a place in the sun.

I draft the house-dog, enlist the cat,
I mobilize bird and beast;

A shrewd politician Reynard-Fox,
A squirrel alert for the feast.
A porcupine has lent his spare-quills;
He toils as journalist-scribe;
On pond-lily leaves the minutes he writes,
The proudest son of his tribe.

The toads sit solemnly on their stools,
The beetles flit here and there;
The Jack-in-pulpits as Rabbis serve,
And open the sessions with prayer.
Then nature's harmonious orchestra,
Carols the folk-tunes and lays,
Locusts and bees, and the humming birds,
The crickets chant paeans of praise.

The mischievous grasshoppers sport with glee;
The magpies chatter in scorn,
While the chief-orator, a hoarse-voiced frog
Sharpens his tones on a thorn.
The branches rustle with rounds of applause;
The flowers nod "ay" and "nay";
The thunder and lightning in chorus join,
When discussion prolongs the day.

At night committees in conclave meet
Beneath the smiling moon;
And all the forest's creatures attend,
To whisper and giggle and croon.
The fireflies shed their tender glow,
While the sage old owls debate,
And as elder statesmen lay down the chart,
For the course of the ship of state.

But at twilight I am happiest;
For amid the cattle's songs
And the cowbell's tinkle I seem to hear
The accents of mighty throngs.
And when at even, the lark is gay,
Mounting higher and higher,
The hope in his heart is a people's hope,
Kindled by heavenly fire.

So this is nature's fond mummery,
To soothe my disconsolate heart;
And I am thankless were I not to laud
Each tiny actor his part.
And yet forlorn as Halevi I roam,
While sadness takes bitter toll;
I sojourn alone in the listening East,
But the West has snared my soul!

ISRAEL BENEATH THE ARCH

THE CAPTIVE SPEAKS

In the year 70, Jewish captives marched beneath the Arch of Titus erected at Rome to commemorate the destruction of the Jewish State.

Forsaken are we, Lord of Hosts, in battle-din;
O God of Israel declare to us our sin.
To grace a Roman holiday, in bonds we march,
The proud oppressor's slaves beneath his sculptured arch.

God's glory hovered over us, kept safe our land;
Until this tyrant smote our homes with heavy hand;
His legions wielded ruthlessly the sword and mace;
And none there was to save us. God had veiled his face.

Our fighting men waged stubborn war; each blow in vain;
Our babes were dashed against the rocks; our loved ones
slain;

Our Temple lies in smouldering heaps, defiled our shrine;
Above our soil the ploughman carves the furrow's line.

Ye conquerors! Think you we faint and feebly die?
We challenge torture; wrack and stake we dare defy!—
But at our weary ankles drags the clanking chain;
And at our hearts we know the wrench of boundless pain.

Our gold Menorah, vessels pure, our holy ark,
The age-stained scrolls whereon our scribes traced God's
own mark,

The prophet-people lift to meet the heathen's gaze;
We taste his taunts and jibes; our lot for years and days.

O cursed Arch! Your every stone for us spells doom;
A monument of victory? For us a tomb.
Beyond this Arch, far-flung extends the exile's track;
And here we grasp the staff; we don the wanderer's pack.

THE FREEMAN SPEAKS

*In 1919, Jewish soldiers of the 77th Division marched beneath
the Victory Arch, erected in New York to commemorate
the downfall of the Central Powers.*

Time's harvest brings a strange revenge! Once more be-
neath an Arch,
The warrior sons of Israel returned from battle march.
Yet not as sorrow-weighted captives, not as shackled slaves,
But joy-blessed heroes for whose honor triumph's banner
waves.

Against the spawn in latter days of cruel imperial Rome,
We joined our hands with comrades true for justice and
for home;
Our Maccabean mettle proved, our courage passed by
none,
We sealed our pact of love amid the forests of Argonne.

Proud Germany our strokes have helped to humble in the
dust;
And by our deed Rome's fame became the prey of moth
and rust.
From boastful kings and emperors we hurled the sceptre
down;
And by our valor Titus fell, and Hadrian's renown.

Behold on Freedom's festal day, we greet the cheering
throngs,
And by its plaudits all the world repairs our ancient
wrongs;

Acclaimed the great Republic's sons, sprung from the death-
less race,
Our hearts o'erflood with memories the years shall not ef-
face.

Not tyranny's, but liberty's triumphal arch we view;
For us it spells not hope destroyed, but hope reclaimed
anew;
'Tis not "Judea Capta"; for our land we here redeem;
'Tis not the twilight of our life, but morning's brilliant gleam.

We stand upon the threshold of the God-appointed day,
When Israel shall live again, and none shall speak him nay!
Beneath an Arch began our mournful trail long ages past;
Beneath an Arch our exile ends; and dawn returns at last!

THE FRIAR, THE MAID, AND THE JEW

(*From the "Hand-Mirror" of Johann Pfefferkorn, the
Apostate*)

In Erfurt from a manuscript
I plucked this strange romance;
The Middle Ages gave it birth;
To me it came by chance.

'Tis told a barefoot friar preached
In pulpit and in square
Against the Jews, against their wiles;
No pity would he spare.

With white-heat plea, fanatic word
He roused the hungry mob;
Beneath his scourge its passion swelled
To massacre and rob.

In vain the anxious Jews besought
To quench his diatribes;
The city council turned deaf ear;
Nor would it heed their bribes.

Then in their mournful memory
The Erfurt Jews recalled
How fierce Crusaders slew their kin,
In bloody mire mauled.

A greybeard Rabbi offered aid;
They granted his appeal,
A thousand ducats placed with him
To turn the wax, brute steel.

So day by day, the Rabbi gave
The begging friars food;
He heaped gifts high; he lavished gold
Upon the cloister's brood.

"This do I," was the Rabbi's word,
"To expiate my sin;
I placed my wealth for usury;
Now shall you profit win."

"What better way can ill-got gain
Be spent, except for faith?
That I be washed as white as snow;
For thus the Scripture saith!"

It came to pass the Rabbi met
The mendicant young friar,
Whose heart was choked with savage hate,
Whose piercing eyes flashed fire.

"Ah would that he might follow Christ!"
The barefoot friar craved;
"Within the bosom of the Church,
Find peace and thus be saved."

Soon did the townsfolk rub their eyes
To see this ill-mixed pair,
In eager converse on the roads,
In market-place and square.

Oft in the cloister, friar and Jew
Perused some heavy tome;
The youth in turn did not disdain
To grace the Rabbi's home.

Now know, the Rabbi guarded there
His orphan foster-child,
A lovely Jewish maid, with eyes
Gazelle-like, sweet and mild.

To her the Rabbi led the monk
And bade him: "Let your word
With eloquence and burning zeal,
Convert her to your Lord!"

Ah yes, but youthful blood runs hot
In sinner and in saint;
Soon worldly thoughts perturbed the monk,
His pious speech grew faint.

For love had lodged within his heart,
The love of man for maid;
He tossed with anguish in his cell,
Before himself afraid.

One day, the Rabbi drew him home,
The tears stood in his eyes:
"A mystery I must unfold,
Before this body dies!

"Long years ago, a secret love
I gaily wooed and won;
She bore a child, my flesh and bone;
And thou art he, my son!"

"Nay by the saints," the friar cried,
"Thou liest, thrice-cursed Jew!"
But parchment scrolls the Rabbi showed,
And proved his story true.

"My heart has yearned for you, my son;
I've wept: 'Ah, would he knew!'
My people's woe has lent me strength,
To win my way to you."

The friar fell upon his knees,
His words a piteous moan:
"Ah come with me, my loved one too,
And claim the Christ your own."

"'Twill not avail," the Rabbi said,
"The Bible bids you heed
As son, your sire's and mother's faith,
And follow them in creed."

Now shall we chide the barefoot monk?
For gone was every doubt;
Love triumphed over bigotry,
And hatred fled in rout.

The lovely Jewess at his side,
The Rabbi on his arm,
He left those scenes of grief and gloom,
For lands where fell no harm.

He doffed his gown as Capuchin,
And donned the robe of Jew;
Found happiness amid his kin.
And to his faith stood true.

'Twas whispered that repentance soon
Assailed the "renegade;"
'Twas said the Jews then tortured him;
His death their vengeance paid.

But we know better; many a source
Reports their end aright:
They lived, the youth, the maid, the Jew,
In endless joy and light.

LEVIATHAN AT THE CIRCUS

It happened one day at the Circus,
'Mid the fragrance of animal-land,
We stared at the tiger and lion;
We marked the giraffe's lanky scion;
We heard the bad gnus that the "flu"
And gnumonia had stricken the gnu.

Then hied we our way to the trough
Where Sir Hippo lay flat on his side,
A mountain of pinkish gray meat,
A rare royal treat,
'Neath the leathery hide,
Though perhaps just a trifle bit tough.

A Midrash leaped quick to my mind,
And I said to my friend: "Fate's unkind;
If we had a sharp knife, we might carve
A slice from Levyosan below
In the *Olam Ha-Zeh*, and not starve
For our share in the *Olam Ha-Boh*."

As we laughed at the notion
Of Hippo-Levyosan,
A white-bearded Jew, very *fromm*,
Turned round with a wink,
And he chuckled, I think,
As he spoke with a *Nigen*'s quaint hum:

"My friends, if I make not too free,
Please grant at your banquet my plea:
I dote on your Yiddish,
So when you make *Kiddish*,
Kind hosts, won't you please invite *me*?"

THE CITY

I am a bondsman and slave of the City.
Not like Elijah in his goatskin, a man of the desert.
For when I step beyond the City's charmed sphere
Ringed like Brunhilde's castle with fire,
I am starved; I yearn with a fierce hunger.
The City is a magnet; I am a sliver of steel;
It drags me from across continents;
In the solitudes and waste places,
I writhe helpless under its spell;
Amid an ocean of calm I am a burning ship,
Consumed in its inmost parts.

I am Elisha, a creature and child of the City.
For when I place heel upon its pavement,
My whole being cries: Home! Home!
There is no world for me outside the City,
For the whole word is in It:
Its men, its books, its movements, its events.
I am a midge upon the flood,
Yet I am there;
I am a waterfly upon the current,
Yet I am there.

I know the City is breaking me.
I rush to and fro,
Sipping its joys.
It saddens me; brutalizes me;
I become a cynic,
A misanthrope through sheer wealth of men.
I grow like the others,
A climber, a grasper, a clutcher.

Its show of men and women passes by;
I grope at them:

My fingers hold phantasms and vanities.
I hurl my tiny hook into the stream
And bring up the stuff of which sneers are made.
Like a mirage the City sways;
When I leap to embrace it,
Like Orpheus Eurydice,
It eludes my clasp,
It shifts and vanishes;
It is gone.

The City is a juggernaut;
It rides me down; it flattens me.
Yet like a crazed worshipper of Ind,
I cast myself in its path.

It does not kill the thing it loves,
For it loves me not,
Nor cares for me, nor heeds me,
Nor knows even I am there.

It saps my faith and energy;
The fires burn lower and lower.
In the end it will throw me,
My substance in ashes,
A twisted cinder upon the slag-heap.

The Thing that I love kills me;
Yea, though it slay me, yet will I trust in the City.
For I am of the race of Asra,
Who must die, when love they cherish.



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